

THE AMERICAN
NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 3.

NEW-YORK, AUGUST, 1832.

VOL. 7.

SERMON CXXIX.

BY JOSIAH HOPKINS,

AUBURN, N. Y.

THE LAW NOT REPEALED BY THE GOSPEL.

ROMANS, iii. 31.—*Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law.*

THE sentiment that the obligations of the law are removed, or at least lowered by the gospel, is directly adapted to destroy the influence of truth and bring the Christian system into contempt. It would seem to be a dictate of common sense, that any overtures from God could never annihilate or lessen obligations on the part of men, which grow out of relations that in their nature are immutable. Indeed it is difficult to see how it would be just or right to release men from such obligations. But absurd and irrational as this sentiment is, there is no error more common. What numbers are resting in sin with apparent contentment in the hope of salvation suspended solely on the fact that *Christ has died for sinners*? Either from an unwillingness to look at the subject seriously, or from an anxiety to obtain countenance in their sinful course, they embrace a sentiment which the apostle in these words rejects with indignation. To expose the absurdity of this sentiment is to guard sinners against one of the most fatal snares laid for their destruction. The consequences of a scheme that holds up the mercy of God at the expense of his other attributes cannot be otherwise than fearful. The text, viewed in its connexion, justifies the following doctrine:

SUCH AS EMBRACE THE GOSPEL WITH CORRECT VIEWS MUST BELIEVE IN THE UNCEASING OBLIGATIONS OF THE LAW.

I. *This, as appears from the context, was evidently the fact with the apostle.* In the 19th verse of the chapter containing the text he says, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God." "All the world" could not be guilty before God unless the obligations of the law were still in force. It is not only plain that the law of which the apostle is speaking in this passage is not the Jewish system of rites and ceremonies, as some suppose; but that its obligations will never cease, at least till the day of final retribution. In the conclusion to which he is brought at the close of the chapter, he is perfectly

explicit. It would seem that he had been accused, from the views which he had given of the atonement, of denying his obligations any longer to obey the law; and viewing it as designed to have directly the opposite effect, and feeling that he had sufficiently shown it by his reasoning, he replied to the accusation with spirit, "God forbid; yea, we establish the law."

II. The truth of our doctrine will be manifest if we consider *the nature of the law*. The obligations of the law, like the relations out of which they grow, are in their nature imperishable. The relations which we sustain to God, such as that we are dependent on him for existence, will continue unimpaired by change or circumstances, and of course the obligations which grow out of them must be equally perpetual.

The principles imbodyed in the law are those of universal equity and justice. In the opinion of some the law is arbitrary, and had no existence till it was proclaimed from Sinai. To such there appears no evidence of its equity only that it was given by a just God. But it will be seen, from the conduct it demands, to acknowledge and secure the rights of every being in the universe. The demand that we should love God with *all* the heart, and our neighbor as ourselves, admits the principle that every being is to be regarded according to his worth or importance in the scale of existence. Every command or prohibition proclaimed previous to the giving of the decalogue involved the same principle as the law. The substance of all the other revelations concerning the duty of man are imbodyed in the law in the briefest form. The scenes which were witnessed on Mount Sinai were well calculated to show the holiness and importance of these principles; and the fact that they were engraven upon stone seems equally fitted to indicate their durability.

These principles need only to be obeyed to produce universal peace and harmony. All occasions for contention would be for ever prevented. There is nothing in these principles that is local, or that has any peculiar adaptation to this world. If the planets are inhabited, their population must sustain the same relation to their Creator as ourselves; and conformity to these principles will produce results as important for them as for us.

The law is such as to exhibit much of the character of God. Men who are at the head of earthly governments are sometimes compelled to announce laws with which themselves are not pleased. They are under the necessity of doing this frequently in order to be popular, and sometimes when they are monarchs only in name and not in authority. But the great Jehovah needs no power but his own to maintain his government. Infinitely above every thing like human policy, his laws are the free and unrestrained expression of his will. We see in the equity and justice of these principles the moral character of his heart. They give us also a perfect standard by which we may determine the character of our own. It takes notice of the feelings, and of every thing sustaining moral character. Other laws can have reference only to the external conduct, for this plain reason, that those who make them know nothing of the heart only as it is seen in the external conduct; but the law of God extends its demands to the heart, and is of itself evidence that he is acquainted with all its feelings and desires. We may cherish designs the most iniquitous, unknown to our fellow-creatures, and unregarded by human laws; but however secret the workings of the heart may be, they are all known to God, and approved or condemned by his law.

This law is limited in its requirements to the capacities of men. It presents not only a scale of obligation which is perfectly equitable, but it asks for no obedience which is not within the reach of man's capacity. There is an impression on the minds of the great mass of men, which has been cherished from childhood, that what God has required in his law is as much beyond their powers as to see a spirit or create a world. This inability is pleaded as an excuse for their neglect of duty and continuance in the road to death. It is doubtful whether among all the apologies that depravity has invented there is one to which so many resort, and on which they depend with so much confidence for justification as this. It is usually the first and the last weapon of defence that is wrested from the hands of the sinner when he submits to the terms of life. Now there is a depravity in this plea, aside from the charge of injustice which it fixes upon the Lawgiver, which is not a little surprising. Were nothing said on the subject of man's capacity in the terms of the law, we might safely infer that if God be holy and just, he will not require impossibilities. But since the subject is so explicitly stated in the terms of the law, since our obligation is so expressly limited to our powers, this plea must be seen to contain a compound of whatever is daring and hateful in the sight of God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." Now the plea that we are unable to obey this command will be seen at once to involve a contradiction. It is to contend that we are *unable* to do what we *can*. If sinners have no ability to love God, they are under no obligations to do it according to the terms of the law. If by the apostacy of Adam his posterity have lost their power to obey, the same inheritance must follow beyond a possibility of evasion. The law is an exhibition of principles which the reason and common sense of men cannot but see are equitable and just. Taking the decalogue as containing the substance of all that God has revealed to govern the conduct of men, and as designed to exhibit distinctly the moral character of his government, it is plain that we may with the same plausibility contend that the overtures of the gospel change the *nature* of equity and justice, as that they affect the obligations of the law.

III. *The gospel would cease to be an exhibition of mercy or grace if the obligations of the law are not perpetual.* It is a dictate of common sense, that every law for the government of moral beings that has obligations has penalties also, and that they are inseparably connected. If we are no longer under obligations to do what the law requires, it has no longer a penalty against us, and of course there can be no mercy in shielding us from its demands. If it were once our duty to love God, it was then mercy to pardon, on our repentance, our neglect of it; but if we are not now justly deserving of punishment for neglecting it, for God to withhold punishment is no mercy. It is no mercy to be saved from what we do not justly deserve. If the requirements of the law are not at this moment obligatory on the spirits of the just made perfect in heaven, there is no grace in their salvation. The demands of the law previous to the death of Christ, in the order of nature, were either just or unjust. If they were just, no compassion on the part of God can lessen or annihilate them. If they were unjust, to violate them was no guilt, and to pardon such violations no mercy. It must be evident

that the existence of mercy or grace is dependent on the perpetuity of the obligations of the law.

IV. *It would be manifestly unjust for God to release men from the obligations of his law.* According to the views of some, it would be right for God to dispose of his law in any way, even to annihilate its obligations. They suppose that no complaint could be made, because it is *his* law. He has "a right to do what he will with his own."

To see the absurdity of these views, let it be asked whether it would be just for a parent to release his children from all obligations to love and respect him if it were within his power? In what way could mankind receive a greater injury than to be released from all obligation to love God and each other? Suppose that by a voice from heaven God should proclaim liberty to men to profane his name and his holy Sabbath, and despise every means by which his fear and love are promoted? Suppose he should give them license to treat the life, liberty, and rights of every being but themselves with perfect disregard? Such would be the consequences were the obligations of the law annihilated: and there are men so blind and inconsiderate as to deem such a liberty desirable. But there is no way within the limits of finite conception in which he would be doing his own kingdom greater injustice. Were he infinitely malevolent, and did he wish to pour out all his wrath on the creatures he had made; did he look forward and adopt measures with a view to their future and irremediable wretchedness, we cannot conceive of any better adapted to his purpose. The picture is still worse, and the supposition still more painful, if we suppose all this has been done by the sufferings and death of Christ. Nothing can be more evident than that men know not what they say, when they affirm that the obligations of the law are lowered or absolved by the gospel.

V. *We cannot receive the Lord Jesus Christ with correct views unless we assent to the estimate that God has placed upon his own law.* To embrace the gospel or believe on Christ does not consist in being willing to be saved by him from deserved punishment without regard to his character or government. The apostle in the context says, that the object for which Christ was set forth to be a propitiation was, "that he might declare the righteousness of God, so that God might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth." Now it is plain that faith must sustain what God has said concerning "his righteousness," or it would not make it just for him to justify the believing sinner. In what way could God have shown a higher regard for his righteousness or his law than in consenting to such a sacrifice as the death of his Son, rather than that its demands should not be sustained? A reference to transactions which are common among men will show the bearing that faith has to make it just for God to justify the sinner. When a man is arrested for some flagrant violation of law and delivered into the hands of justice, do we not learn the estimation in which the law is held by the extent of the punishment inflicted. If the sentence should be death, or imprisonment for life, the most ignorant could understand that the law which was broken was considered essential to the existence and peace of the government. Viewing the subject in this light, we may see with clearness the estimate that God has placed upon his law. It is true that in relation to the sufferings of Christ, it was not

a sentence inflicted upon the criminal, but upon one who had voluntarily taken his place; and we are sure that in order to make the offence in the criminal pardonable, the evil inflicted on the substitute would not be greater than the criminal deserved. In the case above stated, if the sentence were a heavy fine, and if while the criminal is held for security, a friend is kind enough on certain conditions to pay the debt and secure his discharge, a willingness in the criminal to accept of the interference would be an unequivocal acceptance of the conditions. If his friend alleges openly that he considers the decision of the court just and righteous, and with the understanding that the criminal shall cheerfully acknowledge it to be such, he will interfere, it is plain if he accepts of the kindness of his friend, he not only admits the fine to be just, but he admits the law to be as important as the penalty would indicate. Equally plain is it that if we accept of the atonement of Christ, we admit the infinite value of the law that his sufferings and death would intimate. Now what could be more absurd than for this criminal, when he had accepted the interference of his friend, and the fine had been paid, to contend that he was now at liberty to violate that law as often as he pleased? Could he infer that the law or its obligations were annihilated merely because the government had once shown how highly it was valued? Still more absurd would it have been, if the government had made his acceptance of the terms stated by his friend a condition of his release, for him to contend that he might now repeat his crime with impunity. He had, in the most definite manner possible, admitted the importance of the law. It is similar with us if we exercise evangelical faith in Christ. By that act we admit the law to be as important and sin to be as deserving of punishment as the offering of Christ would show. Now when we have made this concession, can we be so absurd as to say in the same breath that the law is no longer obligatory?

VI. Another argument in support of our proposition may be drawn from the fact, that from the uniform usage of the Holy Spirit, sinners are not admitted to feel that they are at peace with God till they can cordially justify the obligations and penalties of the law. The scribe that came to our Savior with the question, "Which is the first commandment of all?" who so readily acceded to the views given of the law, was told by the Savior, "when he saw that he answered discreetly," "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." It would seem, from this declaration, that a cordial and unreserved admission of the obligations and penalties of the law could flow only from the spirit and temper of that kingdom. Not only so, but it is obvious from the nature of things that where such a spirit or temper finds a welcome reception, that heart is fitted for the worship and enjoyment of God in that purer and holier world. In perfect accordance with this have been the experience and observation of every man who has watched the operation of the Spirit. They have seen men at the commencement of that work manifesting the bitterest opposition to the law, openly alleging that a being of equity and justice could not insist upon such claims; and they have invariably found that such men obtained no satisfactory and lasting peace till they could bow submissively and cheerfully to the extent of its demands. It is admitted that sinners, when partially alarmed, and often before they come to the point of justifying the law, from wrong instruction or the deception of their own hearts, embrace a hope. For a while they may rejoice exceedingly in view of

the mercy of God; but their piety infallibly proves like the "morning cloud and the early dew." As they are never slain by the law, so they were never made alive by Jesus Christ. This is doubtless one important reason why the effects of some revivals are temporary and unsatisfactory. The law is not presented with sufficient clearness and faithfulness; and sinners, although they may be alarmed and convinced of their danger, are not convicted of their *guilt*. But where the mind is brought, through the influences of the Spirit, to such a sense of guilt that it feels, and cheerfully and cordially admits, the sentence of the law to be just, it yields the contest, and receives a peace which the world can neither give nor take away. When sinners are brought to this point, however severe their convictions have been, the contest is ended. By a usage that is uniform of this kind, the great Jehovah lets his creatures know that he is determined to maintain the spirit of his law. And it must be evident, upon a moment's reflection, that he can do no less, so long as he is determined to defend the honor of his character and government.

In view of this subject we see,

1. The importance of ascertaining *what is the penalty of the law*. If the gospel supports the entire demands of the law by declaring the righteousness of God, and if faith be indispensable to justification, to all the impenitent and unbelieving this inquiry becomes one of fearful import. To evade the discussion because it fills us with painful forebodings is to betray our own immortal interests. "He that believeth not is condemned already." The question before us refers to nothing less than the extent of this condemnation. What then are the demands of justice or the law of God against impenitent and unbelieving sinners? In the answer to this question, reason and revelation perfectly agree. The train of thought by which we shall be led to a view of the testimony of both is plain and brief. It is a principle universally admitted, that the penalty of justice for the violation of a law is in exact proportion to its importance; and that the importance of a law is determined by the importance of the interests it is designed to secure. It is on this principle that the penalty of some laws is capital punishment, or imprisonment for life, while that of others is only a moderate fine. If some friend of yours had been barbarously murdered, and the jury had found the evidence against the murderer clear and decisive, and there was laid upon him a sentence only of an hour's imprisonment, would you not be shocked at the absurdity and injustice of such a sentence? Who would not see that if the violations of laws for the security of life were to be treated in this manner none would be safe? Who would not escape from such a government? Who would wish to live where his life would be estimated at no higher value? On the other hand; suppose your friend, by some indiscretion, had injured the property of his neighbor to a small amount, and the jury on his trial had decided that he should be imprisoned for life—under such a valuation of law you would consider yourself equally unsafe. Is not the rule by which the penalty of laws is to be determined, from these remarks, sufficiently plain? The penalty in order to be just, from the value of things, must be in proportion to the importance of the law. Now let us look for a moment at the importance of the law of God. It supports the broad principle that every being has rights according to his worth in the scale of existence. On this principle it requires us to love God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Suppose this law should be brought into contempt throughout the empire of God (as

this is the direct tendency of every sin), what would be the effects? What would be the consequences were all its obligations annihilated? All holiness, justice, and equity, and of course all peace and happiness, would be blotted from existence. The character of God would be covered with an indelible stain; and his government would sink under everlasting disgrace. If the principles on which his government and his happiness are founded were annihilated, or if God had not power to maintain his law and his government, nothing could be safe in families, communities, or nations. There would be one unmingled scene of misrule and wretchedness over the whole field of creation, and the powers of darkness would shout one long and horrible note of triumph. Now what penalty will be in proportion to the importance of this law? Every violation of the law may be charged with the destruction of the principles of equity and holiness, and the government of God. The sinner that refuses to love God says to the universe by his example, that the command of God is unjust, that selfishness and neglect of God ought to prevail in the bosom of every moral being. It is nothing to his praise that this spirit is not universal. Now what penalty can we suppose sufficient to express the hatred of God towards such sin? Is it natural death? This, according to the opinion of many, is the penalty of the law. But is this an evil to be compared with the ruin of the law? Others suppose that the curse of the law is spiritual death, by which they mean to be *dead in sin*. This, aside from its consequences, is the sinner's crime; and we may as well suppose that cause and effect are the same, as that the sinner's crime and his punishment are the same. Spiritual death, aside from its consequences, is that in which his spirit of enmity delights. And is it rational to think that the resentment of the great Jehovah towards the violation of his law may be shown without displeasing the sinner? Others imagine that the penalty of the law is a limited period of punishment in hell. But what period can be named which, as an evil, will bear any comparison with the ruin of the law? Take the longest period supposed by these men to be intended by the phrases "ages of ages," or "everlasting," and what is it when compared with the evil at which sin aims? It is far less, and the punishment would be more disproportioned to the crime than the sentence of an hour's imprisonment for wilful murder. If the sinner were to decide upon this question with himself out of view—if he were to look at the equity and importance of the law, and his own case were not concerned in the decision, he would say, without hesitation, that for the violations of it, nothing short of endless death would be an adequate expression of divine disapprobation.

Our next inquiry is for the testimony of Scripture; for after all our reasonings, every question of this kind must be referred to the Bible. The Lawgiver is manifestly better acquainted with the importance of his law, and the penalties which are requisite to guard it, than his creatures; and a reference to the Scriptures will show us that he has not been backward in giving his decision. The proper course for us is to endeavor to ascertain his decision, as the views of criminals are of little weight in deciding their own characters or desert of punishment. It would seem that the Scriptures are sufficiently explicit on this subject. We may obtain an answer to the question before us in few words. "The wages of sin is death." In order to show what kind of death is intended, it is placed in direct opposition to everlasting life—"but the gift of God is eternal life." I am aware that there

is much pains taken to show that the terms "everlasting," "eternal," and the like, as used in the Bible do not mean *endless*. But let me ask, what would be the opinion of a being from some other world, one who is not personally interested in the decision, after acquainting himself with our language, should he set himself to decide this question from the terms that are used in the Bible? Let a man go to the Bible as an honest citizen to a law that has just been penned, to find out what the legislators *did* rather than what they *should* mean. Let him read that the wicked "shall be punished with everlasting destruction"—that they "shall go away into everlasting punishment"—that "their worm shall not die, nor their fire be quenched"—that they "shall be destroyed"—that they "shall be destroyed without remedy"—that their hope shall perish—that they "shall utterly perish"—that they shall not be forgiven either in this world or that which is to come. Now what must be his conclusion from an examination of phrases of this kind, if he honestly desired to know the mind of God—there cannot be a remaining doubt. If any thing less than endless punishment be the "wages of sin," the Bible, on this subject, will mislead the honest reader. Further, when the Scriptures speak of the "love of God," and the "mercy of God," it would be considered as being both absurd and impious to assert that any thing less than infinite *love* and *mercy* were intended. What then must be the meaning of such phrases as the "wrath of God," and the "anger of God?" Besides, regeneration is represented as essential to salvation, and as being effected only by the Holy Spirit. But there is not the slightest hint in the Bible that the Spirit will strive with sinners for their conviction and conversion in the future world. Painful as the truth may be to the mind of the impenitent sinner, there is every variety of expression and every kind of metaphor used in the Bible to show that the penalty of the law can be nothing less than everlasting death.

2. *It is plain from this subject that the penalty of the law is no arbitrary appointment of the Almighty.* Some are convinced that the doctrine of endless punishment is taught in the Scriptures, who yet feel that it is hard and unjust, and that it is supported by the mere sovereignty of the Almighty. We have seen, however, that the law depends on relations as imperishable as the nature of things, and that upon every principle by which we estimate the desert of crime among men, the penalty of sin must be everlasting death. The sinner, it is true, does not accomplish an evil equal to such a penalty; but the criminality of men is not measured by their power or success in the work of evil. It is a principle universally admitted, that criminality is to be predicated wholly on the *intention* or *design*. Is the man who endeavors to steal your property, and by being discovered is prevented, as guilty as though he had succeeded? Is the man who designs to burn your house, and destroy your life, and the lives of your family, and is prevented, as criminal as if he had effected his purpose? Does the man who endeavors to overturn the government, and is defeated, deserve to be treated as though he were successful?—then is the sinner who breaks the least of God's commands and teaches men so, guilty of the whole;—then is the man who heeds not the authority of God—who profanes his name or his holy Sabbath—or refuses to give his whole heart to God, as guilty as though he had effected the ruin of the law. No thanks to him that his spirit does not prevail in the bosom of every dependent moral being. It is the spirit with which he is pleased, and to which he has given all the influence of his own example. Sinners have shown what

they would be willing to do, had they the power, when they put the crown of thorns upon the Savior's head. They would cast contempt, everlasting contempt, on his name, and character, and errand into the world. I do not mean simply the men that crucified him, nor the vilest and bitterest of his enemies at the present day. The statement is true in reference to the most moral among the impenitent. By refusing to accept of him as their Savior, they say that he is not to be compared with the world as an object of affection—that he has wholly mistaken their case, for they stand in no need of any righteousness but their own—that they have some excuse for violating the law which entirely removes their desert of blame. This is said by every sinner in a manner to exert the greatest influence; for in no way can a man show so certainly the feelings of his heart as by his example. If the character of our Lord, and his design in giving himself a sacrifice for sin, were to be estimated according to the treatment he receives from sinners, what could be more odious, or less deserving our attention? Indeed if the sinner could have his desires in relation to the character and government of God gratified, holiness would be banished from the universe. Now if sinners are to be viewed according to their desires, does not sin, from a principle uniformly admitted, and from the nature of things, deserve everlasting death?

3. *This subject shows that no minister can fulfil his duty as "a messenger of the Lord of Hosts" without frequently and faithfully preaching the law, with all its obligations and penalties.* What can be more vain than to imagine that sinners may be persuaded to repent before they are sensible that they are guilty? It is impossible. Of what will they repent till they are convinced that they are sinners? If the law be, as we have shown it to be, the standard by which God will determine the character of all moral beings, is it not impossible that men should know their own character, and equally impossible that they should be induced to repent, or possess any just views of the grace manifested if they should receive pardon, till they have some proper views of the law? It is seriously feared that on this point the preaching of many who are regarded as zealous and faithful at the present day is extremely defective. Carefully look at the multitudes that occupy our houses and throng our streets, ascertain their views and feelings on this subject, and how little will you find them acquainted with the depravity of their hearts? Do they act at all under the impression that they are responsible to God? and that their character and destiny are to be determined by his holy and just law? Could it be inferred from their conduct that they felt themselves under a law that regarded every sinful feeling as exposing them to the penalty of everlasting death? Now if God be just, and if the iniquities of men "*will find them out,*" should not every measure be taken to show them their sins while they may repent and obtain pardon? Till men are made acquainted with the law, they will remain ignorant both of the number and character of their sins. And what is it but cruelty to conceal from them the fact, that for those sins over which they sleep as quietly as though nothing were at stake, unless they repent, and the guilt is cancelled in a Savior's blood, the interests of holiness and heaven will demand their eternal death. Let sinners be convinced of their guilt, and that God will call them to account, and there is some hope that, by presenting Christ before them, they may be persuaded to turn and live; but so long as they are blind to these facts, there is no hope in their case.

It is important also for the people of God frequently to contemplate the

claims and penalties of the law. We can form a far better opinion of the character of our hearts from our feelings towards the law than from our feelings towards the gospel. Let the gospel be proclaimed in a loose and indefinite manner—as it is proclaimed when its conditions are kept out of sight, and it is represented as in opposition to the law—and it is no evidence that we love God that we are pleased with such a gospel. That man of the world who, to increase his wealth, can trample upon every command of God—that unfeeling miser who, for the same purpose, can grind the faces of the poor—that hardened profligate whose greatest anxiety is to escape detection—that drunkard who reels along the streets—yea, that midnight murderer—indeed any one, however sunk in guilt and abandoned of God, would be pleased with a gospel like this. It was not the exhibition of such a gospel that led Felix to tremble. It was a gospel that derived all its value from just views of the law. Let men be told that the blood of Christ can never be applied to any but such as love the law and justify its obligations and penalties, and none but good men, such as Paul, will be pleased.

4. If we have taken a correct view of the law, *how fearfully important is the present life.* Every view we have taken of the law indicates that this life is a state of trial, and that the state of retribution to which it points is interminable. This life, when compared with eternity, is but a point; and upon this point are suspended all the future interests of the soul. The shortness and uncertainty of time have led many to doubt whether such immense interests are depending on it as the Scriptures represent. But this objection is far more specious than solid. Where is the sinner who does not decide, short as his time on earth may be, whether he will submit to God? Wherein would his condition be amended by a longer life or a longer time of trial? Do men lose their alienation of heart as they advance in life? Does their opposition to holiness and heaven wear out with their years? Neither can the uncertainty of life be viewed as an objection of any weight. On this question also we may appeal to facts. Are men more solicitous to secure the favor of God under the impression that life is secure, or under the feeling that it is uncertain? The mere statement of this question is a sufficient answer. The providence of God will be found to be just and holy. It will be seen that it was not for want of opportunity, my hearers, if you continue to neglect the great salvation and sink for ever under the penalty of the law. That interests so extensive and overwhelming should be suspended upon a single point is a plain indication that the whole plan had its origin in the wisdom of God. Impenitent sinners will feel, when they look at the equity of God's law, that the trial with them is a fair one, and that when they are condemned no injustice is done them. But with the saints the magnitude of the danger to which they are exposed will greatly and eternally increase their admiration of the mercy by which they were saved.

5. If the view we have taken of the law be correct, *how great is the mercy of God in the gift of his Son!* The extent of mercy and compassion in the provisions of the gospel is just equal to our demerit according to the decision of his law. He could not give up his law—that would have been a greater sacrifice than to have suffered this whole world to have sunk under its penalty. He has made a declaration of his righteousness which will sustain its holy and equitable claims; while all such as repent and do him the honor to trust in his word may be saved with an everlasting salvation.

6. From the view we have taken of the law, *how great will be the mercy of God towards such as are finally pardoned and received to his favor!* What a theme will the gospel system be to employ their meditations! The more they discover of the purity of the law and the reasonableness of its claims, the more they will see of their personal desert of punishment. They will discover more and more clearly that God has not suffered his Son to pour out his soul unto death to wash away offences of a trifling turpitude. The light of eternity will show that God is not dealing in unreal and unmeaning expressions, when he warns us of the dangerous tendency and guilty character of sin. While it will be seen that sin aimed at nothing less than the ruin of the sinner and the character and government of God, it will be seen also that the blood of Christ has cleansed every believer from the darkest stains. While ages after ages shall roll away, and the plan and extent of divine mercy shall be constantly unfolding, a sense of obligation, and a conception of the greatness of divine grace, will keep pace with the increase of light in the mind of every believer.

7. *How many and how weighty are the motives that urge every sinner to repent, and accept of pardon in the name of Jesus!* Fearful as the penalty of the law is, God has given every assurance that he is determined to execute it. Who among you can dwell with devouring fire? Who among you can dwell with everlasting burnings? If you would not meet the decisions of the judgment-day alone, and support the claims of the law with your own blood, accept the invitations of mercy without delay. Every thing calls upon you to awake. The law and the gospel, the shortness and uncertainty of life, all bid you open your eyes to the interests of your souls. What is it that you gain by crowding the subject from your minds, and heedlessly braving the threatenings of God. Consider what prevents you from repenting this moment, and think how it must appear when you shall look back upon it from the bar of judgment. Is it the urgency of your temporal concerns? A faithful attention to those interests need not hinder your repentance a moment. And if it did, what is your wealth, which you must soon leave, contrasted with the life or death of your immortal spirit? Is it your friends? Are you afraid of a sneer? Without repentance the soul is lost; and would you ever, while the recollection should exist, forgive yourself for venturing everlasting death for such a cause as this? Do you say that you do not know whether these things are true? Is it not time that you did know? The Bible was put into your hands that you might learn and feel the power of its evidence, that it is the word of God.

Do you plead the old and impious excuse that you are unable to repent? Will you dare to tell the Judge when you shall meet him at his bar "that he is a hard master?" Do you say that you will think of it to-morrow? God says, "*to-day*;" and *he may say*, "thou fool, *this night* thy soul shall be required of thee." Your heart says, *to-morrow*, and the enemy of your souls says, *to-morrow*; but the voice of Jehovah and of your own conscience is, "Now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation." Which will you obey? It is time to look at this subject with seriousness. Does not the gospel bear every mark of being God's method of saving sinners, while it supports the law that condemns them? Has he sent his Son to die for you when your sins did not endanger you? Has he sent him to die that he might justify or save you in your sins? Will you neither believe what God hath said, nor what he hath done? Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?

SERMON CXXX.

BY SYLVESTER HOLMES,

NEW-BEDFORD, MASS.

THE MEASURE OF THE SINNER'S DUTY.

II CORINTHIANS, viii. 12.—*For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that which a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.*

THIS passage has primary, if not exclusive reference, to contributions made for the poor saints of Judea and other places. To give a new impulse to the liberality of the Corinthians, Paul told them what had been done by the churches of Macedonia. Lest the spirit of emulation, which was so prominent at Corinth, should be improperly awakened by what he had said, a rule of duty was given in the words of the text. Offerings made, with a willing mind, according to the ability of the giver, will be accepted without reference to other churches or individuals.

If the duty of man is to be regulated by his ability, in his religious charities, then duty and moral obligation in all cases must be determined by the same rule. The passage suggests the idea that,

THE DUTY OF MAN CAN NEVER EXCEED HIS ABILITY TO PERFORM.

A man may be criminal for his inability, but he never can be criminal for not doing that which is beyond his present ability. The man who, by prodigality, has wasted his estate, is criminal, and highly so; but when it is gone, he is no more criminal for not giving liberally, than if his estate had been buried in the ruins of an earthquake. The murderer is guilty and condemned for killing his neighbor, but when he is dead, he is no more to blame for not restoring him to life than if he had been killed by the lightning of heaven.

Moral obligation, then, depends on present ability to do the thing required. Acceptable obedience supposes the ability possessed is put forth, under the control of a willing mind, in the performance of duty. Disobedience ever implies existing ability, which is not used for right purposes, because there is not a willing mind.

These remarks illustrate what is intended by that ability on which obligation depends. It is the actual possession of every thing requisite to the performance of duty, and all our duty, if we have a proper disposition of heart.

In further illustration of the sentiment, I remark :

1. *Nothing can be the duty of man, for the neglect of which he is totally incapable of being made to feel guilt and self-condemnation.* There is in man a moral principle, which is capable of discerning between right and wrong, and charging home guilt for the slightest deviation from the rule of duty. From

various causes this moral principle may be darkened, paralyzed, and silenced; but when freed from embarrassment, as it must be in a future world, it will reproach the transgressor for the least offence. But this reprovcr, in the clearest light and the most active performance of its duty, cannot be made in this, or any other world, to condemn us for that which we could not have done with a willing mind. To state the argument in few words—there cannot be a neglect of duty without sin; but there is no sin in not doing that for which we have not the requisite natural ability—then that which we cannot perform, and consequently neglect with impunity, *cannot be our duty*.

2. The sentiment under consideration is sustained by the fact, that *man cannot create natural ability*. He ought, indeed, to cultivate and strengthen the talents God has given him; but it never was, and never can be his duty to create powers which God has in a sovereign manner withheld. Men are never commanded to add one cubit to their stature, change the color of their hair, or create for themselves eyes and ears, if born blind and deaf. It would be quite as impossible for man to furnish himself with a faculty of the mind, which he did not receive from the hand of nature, as to supply the lack of any bodily organ. Now, if something more than a disposition is needful to the performance of an action—give it what name you please—call it natural ability, or what you will—if this needful something be not possessed, it cannot be a man's duty to perform an action which requires power, he has not and cannot create.

3. *The reasonableness of the Divine law offers further evidence of the truth suggested by the text.* Admit that which it would be infidelity to deny, that the law of the Lord is perfect, and our position is put among the truths which duration will not change. That the commands of God are just, may be proved by the source from which they come, the nature of the duties they enjoin, and their application to successive generations of men, in the endless variety of circumstances in which they are found. But the justice of a law always supposes the power of obedience in him to whom such law is given. A just law only requires and prohibits those things which grow out of the relations of intelligent beings, and accords with principles which were wholly independent of such law. A deviation from the strictest adherence to these principles would make a law radically defective, let the source be what it might from which it came. It is perfectly clear, then, that a reasonable law measures out the duty of man in exact proportion to his ability, never requiring any more nor any less than he is able to perform.

4. *The sanctions of the law and the threatenings of God's word all speak in vindication of the doctrine before us.* The Bible never condemns men, nor threatens condemnation except for neglecting that which might have been done, or doing that which might have been avoided. The prospect of heaven is held out to men, not in connexion with impossibilities, but in connexion with those things which they can do with a willing mind. On the other hand condemnation is written against them, for that alone, which they did freely and voluntarily. If God does threaten men with present evils and future destruction, and these threatenings always respect voluntary actions, then every

denunciation of the Scriptures proves that the duty of man never exceeds his powers to obey.

5. In support of the position we have taken, *we have the testimony of the wise and good in all ages, and in a future day every intelligent being will give his assent to its truth.* It has already been shown that no dividing line between right and wrong, but that assumed in the text, could ever commend itself to the understanding and conscience of men, and that no law but one formed on such principles of moral obligation can be holy and good. Then as the wise and good in all ages have approved of the law, and fully justified all God has required of men, it will follow that the duty of man never has exceeded the bounds prescribed in the text, nor has God ever required of man that which he has not given him ability to perform. That of which good men are convinced in this world, all will be convinced of in the world to come, that God condemns only for the neglect of that which they might have done. If the enlightened and free exercise of reason will constrain every rational being to approve of the rule of duty, as perfectly equal and just, then that rule must require precisely what man is capable of performing.

6. *The joys of the righteous in heaven and the sorrows of the impenitent in hell,* go to prove the truth of our doctrine. Let the conviction be removed from the redeemed, that justice without mercy would have assigned them a different place, and their loudest notes of praise would be silenced. On the other hand, the keenest, if not the only pains of the lost in hell, are created by the inwrought and never yielding conviction that they perish for doing that which they were not compelled to do, and neglecting that which they had the power of doing. If the suffering in hell could feel for an hour that mighty power, and not undeviating justice, put them there, it would be an hour of alleviation. Then it is perfectly plain that fallen angels and wicked men will eternally feel that they are where they ought to be. Who but must see that every note of praise in heaven, and every pain in hell, go to prove that the duty of man is measured by his ability, never imposing any more than he is capable of performing?

Our subject suggests the following inferences :

1. Is the duty of man measured by his ability, then *the entire free agency of man is acknowledged by God in all his dealings with him.* By free agency we understand the power and liberty of following the supreme inclinations of the heart. Such freedom is perfectly consistent with entire dependence—with an unbroken succession of volitions and actions of the same moral character,—and no less consistent with the indispensable connexion between choice and action. As the Bible ever asserts man as thus free, it requires him to do that, and *only* that, which he *can* do with a willing mind.

2. If the duty of man commences and ends with his ability to perform, *then he is able to do every thing God has required of him.* The opinion of natural men is both false and destructive, that they have many pious desires, but are unable to execute them. Men with these views may be alarmed, but they never can be convinced of sin, till they see and feel that the *only* reason

why they have not repented, believed in Christ, loved God supremely, and made themselves a new heart, has been the voluntary choice of their own will. I most sincerely believe in the doctrine of entire dependence, and yet I fear the doctrine is too often stated in a manner to give the sinner wrong views of his difficulty and quiet his conscience. A distinction should here be made which is constantly observed in the government of every family,—I mean a distinction between *ability* to perform a given action and a *disposition* to perform such action. It may be said it is idle to talk of ability where there is not a willing mind:—then it is idle to talk of accountability in an unholy man.

3. *The seat of human depravity* is manifest from our subject. That in man, which chooses his object of supreme affection, and determines and directs his actions, is the seat of his depravity. As the authority and influence of the will are extended to every power of the mind and body, when this is corrupted and alienated, the effects are seen in all over which it presides. The difficulty does not lie in a darkened understanding, and dimness of moral perception, but in a "WILL NOT" in relation to all God has required. The understanding of the sinner will be enlightened, and his conscience made quick and powerful, in hell; but his depravity will remain. It is important that men should know what we mean when we say they are totally depraved. Many objections to this doctrine owe their origin to the indistinct manner of presenting it. If I have a deadly disease about me, let me know its seat and symptoms.

4. It is perfectly manifest from what has been said that *no new powers and faculties are given or needed in regeneration*. If the duty of man is and ever has been limited to his ability, then all he needs or receives in regeneration is a disposition to do what he was always able to do. Grace applies the remedy where the disease holds its empire,—the man is only *made willing* to serve God according to that which he hath, and not according to that which he hath not. We see then why cold speculative reasoning, which goes only to the understanding, will simply put in order the furniture of the head, and why the most eloquent lectures on the beauties of virtue and the deformities of vice, will only make clear the outside of the man. The sharpest arrows of truth must be directed to the very point where the Holy Ghost does his work in regeneration.

5. If the duty of man is limited by his ability to perform, then *the justice of his condemnation is demonstrated*. In this world men may and do find fault when told that they are in danger of future and endless condemnation. Men generally believe their sins few, and a multitude suppose they have done as well as they could. But the truth is, no man has done as well as he could who has not done *all* his duty. This truth will appear most clearly another day. In this world men have a thousand reasons for their impiety, but in another world they will all be resolved into one, when it shall be said, Bring hither mine enemies that would not that I should reign over them, and slay them before me. The controversy between God and man will then be stripped of all that ignorance, pride, and sophistry have drawn about it, and be exhibited as it is, directly between the heart and a perfectly holy law.

6. We see that distinguishing mercy is consistent with the impartiality of God and the freedom of man. If God requires of man only what he could do if he would—if the reason why man does not do his duty is wholly in his unwillingness—and if a change of heart consists in simply giving a disposition to do that which all have the natural power of doing,—then the grace of God in giving a disposition to be holy to some and not to all, is free from all the objections which have been urged against it. If grace removed some mighty defect in natural ability, and this was not done for all, then there might be a want of justice in the distinction; but this is not the case. If the conditions of salvation were any thing but what they are, it might be unjust in God to *have mercy on whom he will have mercy*. But as the salvation of man depends on that which is within his reach, if he has a willing mind, let his circumstances be what they may; he has not the shadow of a cause to find fault if left to follow his own inclination down to endless perdition. When he hears the redeemed sing of grace which saved them, he will eternally know that it was grace which he refused. There is no world of which we have any knowledge, where the distinguishing mercy of God is found fault with, but the world in which we live, and surely there is no world where there is less cause. If the understanding and conscience of men governed them rather than their heart, not an objection would be heard to the sovereignty of Divine grace.

7. This subject shows to all that hear me, that nothing has prevented, and nothing now prevents your salvation but your own heart. If you came to the house of God destitute of piety, this was the reason—if you go away impenitent, this will be the reason. If you are condemned at last, and perish in hell, this will be the reason. Sinner, what wilt thou, what canst thou say, when God shall deal with thee?